Old school renaissance as a style of play

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I consider a style of play of tabletop role-playing games which focuses on objective player skill without extensive fixed ruleset, and describe it using two major hobbyist theories. This establishes one use of hobbyist theories – a framework for discussion styles of play. The style of play is associated with the old school renaissance (OSR) movement and can be seen as an expansion of war gaming and board gaming to scenarios where the rules do not cover all eventualities, hence requiring human (referee) judgment, but keeping the element of player skill as objective as possible. This type of knowledge of a gaming style can help a player to understand their and others' preferences and practices and to communicate them more clearly to others. A designer can use this type of information to know what kind of content is relevant for their audience.¹

After the introduction I briefly discuss the OSR in general and then define the hobbyist theories in use. After these, in the main part of the article, I discuss various features of OSR play and their interconnections. Though the different features are well-known, a synthesis and a description of how they support each other is lacking in the academic literature. Finally I conclude by applying the hobbyist theories to the style of play.

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¹Lack of such knowledge can lead to products that are difficult to use or provide irrelevant information. D. Vincent Baker. *The Secluseum of Orphone of the Three Visions*. Finland: Lamentations of the Flame Princess, 2013. had such a reception; see Alex Schröder. “Moldvay dungeon stocking vs. secluseum.” *Alex Schroeder*, 2013. https://alexschroeder.ch/wiki/2013-08-21_Moldvay_Dungeon_Stocking_vs._Secluseum; Bryce Lynch. “The secluseum of orphone of the three visions.” *tenfootpole.org*, 2014. <https://tenfootpole.org/ironspike/?p=2311>.

Many common definitions of games claim that a thing must have goals and rules which make achieving the goals non-trivial. Role-playing games can be considered as borderline cases of games, since the rules are malleable and they often do not have explicit goals or quantifiable outcomes. For example Salen and Zimmerman² consider them as an edge case; also Sutton-Smith³ classifies *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) (hereafter D&D) as a form of mind or subjective play, rather than as a contest – a class which includes, for example, sports and board games. Dormans⁴ associates role-playing games more with *paidea* than *ludus*, using the terminology of Caillois⁵, where *ludus* refers to activities with explicit rules and structure, whereas *paidia* refers to more playful activities that are more spontaneous. In the presently discussed style of play the rules are, though malleable and often spontaneously developed in play, in a specific sense objective, and the players have specific goals at which they can succeed or fail.

It needs to be emphasized that I do not investigate the way D&D or other games were originally played, but rather the modern phenomenon known as OSR.⁶

OSR

Old school renaissance⁷ is a movement focused on playing and reinventing early editions of D&D⁸ role-playing game.⁹ Though the movement started as

²Katie Salen and Erik Zimmerman. *Rules of play: game design fundamentals*. The MIT Press, 2004, chapter 7.

³Brian Sutton-Smith. *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard university press, 1997, p. 4-5.

⁴Joris Dormans. “On the role of the die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules.” *Game Studies*, 6.1 (2006), section ‘Rules of simulation and interaction’. <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>.

⁵Roger Caillois. *Man, play and games*. 1961.

⁶Jon Peterson. *Playing at the world*. Unreason Press, 2012. gives a perspective on the history of D&D. Investigating the differences and similarities would be an interesting direction for further work.

⁷Or revival, rules, revolution, role-playing,...; see Brendan Strejcek. “What about the R?” *Necropraxis*, 2018. <http://www.necropraxis.com/2018/12/20/what-about-the-r/>.

⁸Gary Ernest Gygax and David Lance Arneson. *Dungeons & Dragons*. Tactical Studies Rules, 1974.

⁹Matthew J. Finch. *A quick primer for old school gaming*. Mythmere Games, 2008; Greg Gillespie and Darren Crouse. “There and back again: Nostalgia, art, and ideology in old-school Dungeons and Dragons.” *Games and*

essentially a nostalgic endeavour, its scope has widened significantly.¹⁰ For a more nuanced view of the multiple meanings attributed to OSR, see the OSR survey of Milton and Strejcek¹¹ According to the survey, many people see OSR as a style of play or as a set of game design principles, while the view as a social movement is less widespread, and the view as a commercial entity even less popular. The movement has produced fictional material, games in genres, rules and presentation quite different from early and modern mainstream D&D products.¹² Mizer¹³ has discussed OSR as a possible re-enchantment of D&D play.

As many of the games associated with OSR are silent on how they are to be played¹⁴, I rely on other sources to discuss the matter. To ensure that I am indeed documenting a style of play, rather than defining a new one, I present several sources for my claims about the style of play.

An older and famous document is the Quick Primer to Old School Gaming¹⁵ by Finch. It mostly discusses the differences between old school play and stereotypical play of third and fourth editions of D&D¹⁶. The differences

Culture, 7.6 (2012), p. 441–470; James Maliszewski. “Full circle: A history of the old school revival.” *the escapist*, 2009. <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/tabletop/columns/days-of-high-adventure/6412-Full-Circle-A-History-of-the-Old-School-Revival>; Corey Ryan Walden. “A living and breathing world...”: *examining participatory practices within Dungeons & Dragons*. Master’s thesis, Auckland university of technology, school of communication studies, 2015, chapter 9.

¹⁰Nostalgic endeavour: Gillespie and Crouse; Walden. Wider scope: Ben Milton, Steven Lumpkin et al. *Principia apocrypha*. Lithyscaphe, 2018. <https://lithyscaphe.blogspot.com/p/principia-apocrypha.html>; Brendan Strejcek. “OSR attributes.” *Necropraxis*, 2019. <http://www.necropraxis.com/2019/01/18/osr-attributes/>.

¹¹Brendan Strejcek. “OSR survey: meaning.” *Necropraxis*, 2018. <http://www.necropraxis.com/2018/12/13/osr-survey-meaning/>.

¹²Some examples: Dave Brockie and Joe Bittman. *Towers two*. Lamentations of the Flame Princess adventures. Lamentations of the Flame Princess, 2016. Kevin Crawford. *Godbound: a game of divine heroes*. Sine Nomine Publishing, 2016. Chris McDowell. *Into the Odd*. SoogaGames, 2014. Scrap Princess and Patrick Stuart. *Fire on the velvet horizon*. Gravity Knife Agent, 2015.

¹³Nicholas J Mizer. “The paladin ethic and the spirit of dungeoneering.” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 47.6 (2014), p. 1296–1313.

¹⁴Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Rediscovering the context of old school gaming’

¹⁵Finch.

¹⁶Monte Cook, Jonathan Tweet et al. *Player’s handbook: core rulebook I*. 3.5th edition. Wizards of the Coast, 2003. Rob Heinsoo, Andy Collins et al. *Dungeons and Dragons players handbook: Arcane, divine and martial heroes*. 4th edition. Wizards of the coast,

concern how to deal with the different types of rules, but say little about having different goals in play.

Raggi wrote a guide to adventure writing and later a referee book to *Lamentations of the Flame Princess Weird Fantasy Role-playing Game*¹⁷, where he explains adventure writing and also discusses motivations for playing in a particular old school way. There are extended discussions on the subject matter on the Story games forum by Eero Tuovinen and others.¹⁸ The threads discuss how and why certain game mechanics are as they are.

Recently, Perry collected and edited play advice from Milton and Lumpkin, and released it under creative commons as a booklet.¹⁹

Empirical studies

The OSR survey²⁰ by Milton and Strejcek explored how OSR is understood from various angles.

The thesis of Walden²¹, which uses responses of 51 participants from various D&D-related forums, indicates that ‘I enjoy being challenged, using my skill as a player to overcome obstacles’ is a reason for almost one in four

2008.

¹⁷James Edward Raggi IV. “Guide to adventure writing.” In *Open Game Table: The Anthology of Roleplaying Game Blogs*, Volume 1. Edited by Jonathan Jacobs. Nevermet Press, 2009, p. 51–55. Originally a blog post <https://lotfp.blogspot.com/2008/11/guide-to-adventure-writing.html>. James Edward Raggi IV. *Lamentations of the Flame Princess: Weird fantasy roleplaying referee book*. Grindhouse edition. Lamentations of the Flame Princess, 2011.

¹⁸Though there are more threads, we mention Eero Tuovinen. “A cool thing happened in my D&D session.” *Story games*, 2012. <http://web.archive.org/web/20190701121832/http://story-games.com/forums/discussion/15822/>; Eero Tuovinen. “[OSR]: Encouraging players to think things through / ask questions / take care.” *Story games*, 2013. <http://web.archive.org/web/20190701121928/http://story-games.com/forums/discussion/19012/>; Eero Tuovinen. “[D&D] Anybody uses material components for spells?” *Story games*, 2014. <http://web.archive.org/web/20190701121958/http://story-games.com/forums/discussion/19200/>; Eero Tuovinen. “Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D].” *Story games*, 2014. <http://web.archive.org/web/20190701122035/http://story-games.com/forums/discussion/19234/>.

¹⁹Milton, Lumpkin et al.

²⁰<http://www.necropraxis.com/tag/survey/>. Strejcek has discussed the reliability and generalizability of the results at Brendan Strejcek. “OSR survey participation.” *Necropraxis*, 2018. <http://www.necropraxis.com/2018/12/09/osr-survey-participation/>.

²¹Walden, especially section 5.4.

players for why creating fictitious identities appeals to them in playing D&D. This does not allow deducing the priorities of OSR-identifying people, as there is no way of isolating them in the thesis, and as challenges might include game mechanical challenges, such as character optimization, in addition to strategy and problem solving discussed later in this article. The study does suggest that there are people who play D&D in a challenge-oriented way.

Hobbyist theories – threefold and GNS

I consider two hobbyist, or fan, theories that classify ways of playing role-playing games.²² The first theory is the threefold model (GDS theory) developed at the newsgroup `rec.games.frp.advocacy`²³ by Mary Kuhner and others, and documented by John H. Kim²⁴. I interpret the threefold model as a classification of game master decision making during play. The second hobbyist theory is the creative agenda theory²⁵, later further developed as part of the big model²⁶, mainly developed at the Forge website²⁷ by Ron Edwards and others. The GNS theory classifies social rewards that the participants give to each other during play for creative contributions.

GNS theory was a successor of the threefold theory²⁸, but use a mature version of GNS, which differs significantly from its predecessor.

²²Evan Torner. “Rpg theorizing by designers and players.” In *Role-playing game studies: Transmedia foundations*. Edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding. Routledge, 2018. discusses hobbyist theories in more detail and gives a wider background on the theories mentioned here, as well.

²³John H. Kim. *rec.games.frp.advocacy info*. 2007. <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/rgfa/>

²⁴John H. Kim. *The threefold model FAQ*. February 2003. http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/faq_v1.html.

²⁵Also know as GNS theory. Ron Edwards. *GNS and other matters of roleplaying theory*. Forge, 2001. <http://indie-rpgs.com/articles/1/>.

²⁶Emily Care Boss. “Key concepts in Forge theory.” In *Playground worlds*, number 6 in Solmukohta book series. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Ropecon ry, 2008, p. 232-247.

²⁷<http://www.indie-rpgs.com>. For more on the Forge, see Torner; William J. White. “‘Actual play’ and the Forge tradition.” In *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2015*. Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman. Wyrld Con, 2015, p. 85-99.

²⁸Torner.

Threefold

The threefold theory is a classification of different styles of play²⁹: ‘The Threefold Model is one way of grouping many aspects of “group contracts” into logical categories. Full group contract includes every facet of how the game is played: not just the mechanical rules, but also how scenarios are constructed, what sort of behavior is expected of PCs, how actions not covered by the rules are resolved, allowance of outside distractions, and so forth. The Threefold divides up many of these into categories known as Drama, Game, and Simulation.’

The scope of the theory was under discussion: ‘What the Threefold applies to is an open question. It is frequently used to look at GM decisions during a session about what should happen in the game-world, and to a lesser extent at adventure design during a campaign. As for other parts of the “game contract”, there are different views about its applicability. It may or may not apply player behavior, out-of-game methods, system design, campaign design, or other topics.’

In this article I choose to use the threefold theory in a strictly limited sense: it only classifies game master decision making. The reason is that I want a classification that uses different criteria than the creative agenda classification; when this is the case, both of the classifications can be used simultaneously to attain more precise results.

Quoting Kim:

dramatist is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline. Different kinds of stories may be viewed as satisfying, depending on individual tastes, varying from fanciful pulp action to believable character drama. It is the end result of the story which is important.

gamist is the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the players (as opposed to the PCs). The challenges may be tactical combat, intellectual mysteries, politics, or anything else. The players will try to solve the problems they are presented with, and in turn the GM will make these challenges solvable if they act intelligently within the contract.

simulationist is the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns

²⁹Kim 2003.

to affect the decision. Thus, a fully simulationist GM will not fudge results to save PCs or to save her plot, or even change facts unknown to the players. Such a GM may use meta-game considerations to decide meta-game issues like who is playing which character, whether to play out a conversation word for word, and so forth, but she will resolve actual in-game events based on what would ‘really’ happen.

The threefold model has been criticized on its definition of gamism by Gleichman³⁰, who suggests that gamism should be defined as the style of play which ‘values the application of objective players skill...’, rather than a style where the game master provides fair challenges, as Kim does. Gleichman would classify the style of play discussed in this article into gamism. However, since Gleichman’s definition is very close to the creative agenda of step on up, I choose to not use it.

More general criticism of the model is in terms of the model not being balanced, but rather having been constructed by advocates of a single style (simulationism).³¹ This criticism is based on identifying with a particular word or style of play, and claiming that the terminology used by the theory does not capture this notion. This criticism is not severe when the theory is used for analysis, as in the present article – the names of the classifications should be taken as arbitrary, even if inspired by their other meanings.

Creative agenda

In addition to various discussion forum threads, the first article mentioning the three classes of creative agendas (not yet known by that name) was the article ‘System does matter’³² by Edwards. The agendas were discussed as player priorities, quite similar to the threefold model. Edwards wrote more

³⁰Brian Gleichman. *Comments on the rec.games.frp.advocacy threefold*. <http://whitehall-paraindustries.com/Theory/Threefold/rgfa.htm>.

³¹Gleichman; Brian Gleichman. *Why RPG theory has a bad rep*, 2009. http://whitehall-paraindustries.com/Theory/Threefold/rpg_theory_bad_rep.htm.

³²Ron Edwards. *System does matter*. Forge, 1999. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/11/>.

articles on the subject³³. There is also a wiki³⁴ that summarizes some of the terms of the theory. As the theory has been actively under development, one should not consider a particular article as authoritative, especially not any of the older ones.

The big model, a larger theory which also includes the creative agenda theory³⁵, defines creative agenda as: ‘Creative Agenda is what we, as players, want to get out of our game – not in terms of our imagined content (I want elves to be in the game), or what we want the rules to look like (I want a hero point rules), but rather in terms of what we want to get from the game as a creative exercise – what sort of satisfaction and fulfilment the game provides us as people. In short – remember how I said that the assumed social agenda is “I want to (have fun / be creatively satisfied) with my friends by playing this game?” Well, creative agenda is the satisfaction that we’re looking for.’³⁶

Creative agenda is specific to a given game group playing a given game during a particular instance of play³⁷, but it has widely being used to describe game texts³⁸. I will detail a particular creative agenda that has a significant presence in the OSR community, while being fairly rarely elsewhere, and argue that it fits into a particular class of creative agendas (step on up). The three named classes of creative agendas are:

- Step on up, or gamism.³⁹

³³Edwards 2001; Ron Edwards. *Simulationism: the right to dream*. Forge, 2003. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/15/>; Ron Edwards. *Gamism: step on up*. Forge, 2003. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/21/>; Ron Edwards. *Narrativism: story now*. Forge, 2004. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/25/>; Ron Edwards. *The provisional glossary*. Forge, 2004. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/25/>. There are also several discussion forum threads on the Forge and elsewhere.

³⁴<http://big-model.info/>

³⁵Boss.

³⁶This particular definition is from Ben Lehman. “Introduction to Forge theory.” *This is my blog*, 2005. http://darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/theforge/ben_theory_intro.html. Further explanations can be found in Eero Tuovinen. “What GNS theory claims.” *Game design is about structure*, 2008. <https://isabout.wordpress.com/2008/11/11/what-gns-theory-claims/>; and concise definitions can be found in Edwards, *Narrativism: story now*; Edwards, *The provisional glossary*; and the big model wiki http://big-model.info/wiki/Creative_Agenda.

³⁷Edwards 2001

³⁸By Edwards in Edwards, *Simulationism: the right to dream*; Edwards, *Gamism: step on up*; Edwards, *Narrativism: story now*; and by many others elsewhere.

³⁹Edwards has written a longer explanation and definition. Edwards, *Gamism: step on up*.

‘Social assessment of personal strategy and guts among the participants in the face of risk.’⁴⁰

‘this mode includes all CAs where the players concern themselves with recognizing and resolving challenges, enjoying the excitement of struggle and the social esteem, however playful, that accrues to the victor.’⁴¹

- Story now, or narrativism: ‘Story Now requires that at least one engaging issue or problematic feature of human existence be addressed in the process of role-playing. “Address” means:
 - Establishing the issue’s Explorative expressions in the game-world, “fixing” them into imaginary place.
 - Developing the issue as a source of continued conflict, perhaps changing any number of things about it, such as which side is being taken by a given character, or providing more depth to why the antagonistic side of the issue exists at all.
 - Resolving the issue through the decisions of the players of the protagonists, as well as various features and constraints of the circumstances.

[...] The Now refers to the people, during actual play, focusing their imagination to create those emotional moments of decision-making and action, and paying attention to one another as they do it. [...]

There cannot be any “the story” during Narrativist play, because to have such a thing (fixed plot or pre-agreed theme) is to remove the whole point: the creative moments of addressing the issue(s).’⁴²

- The right to dream, or simulationism:⁴³

‘this mode includes all CAs where the players concern themselves with experiencing the SIS matter they introduce as what it is, without bringing in external ambitions apart from directing where the experience is going.’⁴⁴

⁴⁰Edwards, *The provisional glossary*; http://big-model.info/wiki/Step_On_Up.

⁴¹Tuovinen 2008.

⁴²Edwards, *Narrativism: story now*. For further definitions and explanations see Tuovinen 2008 and the big model wiki http://big-model.info/wiki/Story_Now.

⁴³Edwards, *Simulationism: the right to dream*;[?] is too long to quote here.

⁴⁴Tuovinen 2008.

‘Commitment to the imagined events of play, specifically their in-game causes and pre-established thematic elements.’⁴⁵

The theory has been criticized as impenetrable and full of jargon, offensive, for issues of balance (as the threefold theory) and for being wrong about the empirical claims it makes.⁴⁶ The empirical claims concern whether the three named classes of creative agendas exist, cover every style of play and are mutually exclusive.⁴⁷ I do not need to make assumptions concerning the empirical claims, and also choose to use the established terminology, rather than re-inventing it, no matter how flawed the existing terminology might be. I do prefer the longer terms for classes of creative agendas to avoid confusion with the threefold model.

The style of play

OSR play has traditional roles for the player and the game master: The players play their characters, one or more⁴⁸ each, while the game master describes the game world and adjudicates player character actions. The game master⁴⁹ prepares dangerous adventure locations⁵⁰ and presents them to the players from the perspective of their characters. The players try to have their characters survive and triumph.⁵¹

Exploration, strategy and logistics, and creative problem solving are significant elements of play. There is high reliance on ad-hoc rulings, rather than fixed rules more typical of traditional games. This allows for play much

⁴⁵Edwards, *The provisional glossary*; http://big-model.info/wiki/The_Right_To_Dream.

⁴⁶White.

⁴⁷Tuovinen 2008.

⁴⁸David Bowman. Entourage approach. In *Open Game Table: The Anthology of Roleplaying Game Blogs*, Volume 1. Edited by Jonathan Jacobs. Nevermet Press, 2009, p. 2-4; Tuovinen, *Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D]*.

⁴⁹Sometimes called referee Raggi 2011; Tuovinen, *Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D]*; Nicholas J Mizer. *The Greatest Unreality: Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*. PhD thesis, Texas A & M University, 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/156154>.

⁵⁰Dungeons, but also wilderness and urban areas, and social situations; see Raggi 2011.

⁵¹Peitsa Veteli. “Kertsidunsku – what is it all about?” *Kertsidunskun kronikat*, 2017. <https://kertsidunsku.wordpress.com/2017/06/16/kertsidunsku-what-is-it-all-about/>.

like in cooperative board games, but with a wider scope of play – the ‘do anything’ promise⁵² of role-playing games. There are also other ways in which OSR games are played.⁵³ Next I will discuss the features of the style of play in greater detail.

Exploration means learning more about unknown places.⁵⁴ Typical methods of encouraging exploration include having players draw maps of dungeons⁵⁵, having dungeons with several possible ways through them and different things to be encountered when travelling different ways⁵⁶, and the possibility of not finding all areas in a dungeon⁵⁷. The same principles apply to wilderness exploration.

A frequently repeated quote from Gary Gygax is used as a proverb: ‘YOU CAN NOT HAVE A MEANINGFUL CAMPAIGN IF STRICT TIME RECORDS ARE NOT KEPT’⁵⁸. Though one cannot deduce the mentality of a culture only from proverbs, they do provide supporting evidence.⁵⁹ Tracking time relates to resource management via random encounters (that often happen on fixed in-game time intervals) and consumables such as food, spells and torches.⁶⁰ It also makes exploration meaningful; without time

⁵²Walden, section 7.1.

⁵³Documentation is difficult to find, but Stukey mentions some in Randall S. Stukey. *Microlite 75: characters & magic*. 1.01 edition. RetroRoleplaying.com, 2011.

⁵⁴Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Give them layers to peel’; Jason Cone. *Philotomy’s Dungeons & Dragons musings*. 2007, section ‘Creating an old-school dungeon’.

⁵⁵Raggi 2011; Mizer 2015, chapter 5; Nicholas J Mizer. “Re-embedding through distancing in Dungeons & Dragons.” In *American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting*, 2011.

⁵⁶Cone, section ‘Creating an old-school dungeon’; Justin Alexander. “Jaquaying the dungeon.” *The alexandrian*, 2010. <http://thealexandrian.net/wordpress/13085/roleplaying-games/jaquaying-the-dungeon>; Melan. *Dungeon mapping*. 2006. <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/dnd/dungeonmaps.html>, originally published at En world <http://www.enworld.org/forum/showthread.php?168563-Dungeon-layout-map-flow-and-old-school-game-design> and Dragonsfoot <https://www.dragonsfoot.org/forums/viewtopic.php?t=18710&start=35>.

⁵⁷Raggi 2011; Cone, section ‘Creating an old-school dungeon’.

⁵⁸Gary Ernest Gygax. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide*. 1. edition. Tactical Studies Rules, 1979, p. 37.

⁵⁹Pentti Hakamies. “Proverbs and mentality.” In *Myth and mentality: Studies in folklore and popular thought*. Edited by Anna-Leena Siikala. In series Studia Fennica Folkloristica. Helsinki, Finland: Finnish literature society, 2002, p. 222-230. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21435/sff.8>.

⁶⁰Raggi 2011; Mizer 2015, chapter 5; Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Offer tough choices, Keep up the pressure’.

pressure, all the unknown places could be found by sheer patience.

Strategy has a multitude of meanings in context of games.⁶¹ Even though building strongholds, raising armies, and other such concerns are parts of some OSR games,⁶² strategy as used to describe OSR play does not typically refer to scope. Rather, it describes choosing one's battles,⁶³ logistics⁶⁴ and resource management.

A related concept is the fan theory dichotomy of 'combat as war or combat as sport'⁶⁵, where some enjoy avoiding combats and making them highly unfair to their own benefit as key parts of play, whereas others would rather have fair and balanced combats. The distinction is similar to the one pointed out by Dor⁶⁶ in the realm of video games. The OSR survey suggests that OSR participants are less in favour of balanced encounters than others are.⁶⁷

One consequence of emphasizing strategy is that the game master must not have decided what should happen in the game before play starts,⁶⁸ and should not decide it arbitrarily on the fly, either, but rather should let players make decisions and face the consequences. In contrast, many role-playing games are played in ways that do not allow the players to make significant decisions about the direction of the game.⁶⁹

Creative problem solving means using equipment, magic or other resources in non-obvious ways.⁷⁰ Environment and non-player characters (such as

⁶¹Simon Dor. "Strategy in games or strategy games: Dictionary and encyclopaedic definitions for game studies." *Game Studies*, 18.1 (2018).

⁶²For example Tuovinen 2012; Blacky the Blackball. *Dark dungeons: retro roleplaying game rules*. Gurbintroll Games, 2010, chapters 13-14.

⁶³Cone, section 'Creating an old-school dungeon'; Milton, Lumpkin et al., section 'Offer tough choices'.

⁶⁴Veteli; James Maliszewski. "Time in the old school campaign." *Groggardia*, 2009. <https://groggardia.blogspot.com/2009/07/time-in-old-school-campaign.html>.

⁶⁵Daztur. "Combat as sport vs. combat as war: a key difference in D&D play styles..." *En world*, 2012. <http://www.enworld.org/forum/showthread.php?317715-Very-Long-Combat-as-Sport-vs-Combat-as-War-a-Key-Difference-in-D-amp-D-Play-Styles>.

⁶⁶Dor, section 'Formal definitions'.

⁶⁷Strejcek 2019.

⁶⁸Raggi 2011; Strejcek 2019; Milton, Lumpkin et al., sections 'Divest yourself of their fate', 'Leave preparation flexible', and 'Let them off the rails'.

⁶⁹Jessica Hammer. 'Agency and authority in role-playing "texts"?' In *A new literacies sampler*, volume 29 of *New literacies and digital epistemologies*. Edited by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear. Peter Lang publishing, 2007.

⁷⁰Milton, Lumpkin et al., sections 'Build responsive situations', 'Let them manipulate

monsters) are also used against various challenges. Social engineering and using groups of non-player characters against each other is often favoured; a good dungeon has several factions. A good challenge, in this sense, is one that does not rely on specific character abilities or knowledge about the game setting to solve,⁷¹ in contrast to a mechanical challenge solved by skillful manipulation of game rules, or a challenge that relies on obscure knowledge the players might have, such as the symbols of diegetic gods, to solve a riddle.

A common rule in OSR games is to tie character advancement into the character gathering treasures, or achieving other goals known to the player.⁷² There might be a minor reward for killing monsters, but it is typically significantly smaller than the reward for recovering treasure; it can also be absent.⁷³ This, when combined with character death being a realistic consequence of combat⁷⁴, implies that finding other ways of recovering treasures is rewarded by the game rules. This encourages creative problem solving and strategic thinking, since OSR games, much as many other tabletop role-playing games, do tend to have formal and codified rules for combat, while other problems solving methods demand more creativity.

However, it is not clear how much and in which ways experience points and other mechanical rewards actually affect the play of any given group. Certainly some players are very receptive to mechanical rewards⁷⁵, while others mostly ignore them. Mechanical rewards can still give players an explicit permission to act in a particular way and focus player attention on particular matters, thus facilitating social rewards, the defining factor of the creative agenda theory. Explicit research on this matter in the context of tabletop role-playing games seems to be lacking, even though the effects of

the world’, ‘Good items are unique tools’, ‘...and challenges with no answer’, and ‘Don’t be limited by your character sheet’.

⁷¹Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Player ingenuity over character ability’; Arnold Kemp. ‘OSR-style challenges: “rulings not rules” is insufficient.’ *Goblin punch*, 2016. <https://goblinpunch.blogspot.dk/2016/02/osr-style-challenges-rulings-not-rules.html>.

⁷²Tuovinen, *Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D]*; Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Xp for discovery & adversity’.

⁷³Tuovinen 2012; Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Xp for discovery & adversity’; James Edward Raggi IV. *Lamentations of the Flame Princess: Weird fantasy roleplaying*. 2012 edition. Lamentations of the Flame Princess, 2012.

⁷⁴Raggi 2011; Tuovinen 2013; Mizer 2015, chapter 5; Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Deadly but avoidable combat’.

⁷⁵Milton, Lumpkin et al., section ‘Xp for discovery & adversity’.

gamification in other contexts have been studied widely.⁷⁶

In OSR play there is little reliance on written rules, and high reliance on the referee⁷⁷ making rulings to resolve situations in a fair manner.⁷⁸ ‘Fair’ means both equal treatment of players, as is common guidance offered by many role-playing games, and not manipulating die rolls or ignoring their results.⁷⁹ Typically fairness is maintained by appealing to the (typically sparse) rules, precedents created by rulings, and finally the fictional reality or diegesis.⁸⁰ Typically the game master can also refer to the parts of the fiction that have not yet been established in communication among the participants; this is necessary to make exploration of a pre-existing fictional situation possible, but requires some care to make sure that the resolution process is fair and is perceived as fair. The low reliance on an exhaustive body of rules also makes the re-enchantment investigated by Mizer⁸¹ possible.

In particular, the game master should be a ‘neutral’, ‘objective’, ‘impartial’ or ‘hygienic’ arbiter or referee.⁸² Neutrality does not mean avoiding subjective input, but rather the game master does not make decisions with the goal of making combats suitably challenging, saving player characters from death or other bad consequences, or bringing bad consequences on players who are playing well or just being lucky. Neutrality also means not reinforcing a particular dramatic arc, or making certain dramatic events happen.⁸³

⁷⁶Michael Sailer, Jan Ulrich Hense et al. “How gamification motivates: An experimental study of the effects of specific game design elements on psychological need satisfaction.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 69 (2017), p. 371-380.

⁷⁷Or the group as a whole, though in practice the difference is not large; referee decisions are always conditional on group acceptance, and in practice the referee is often the most well-versed in the art of rulings. Tuovinen 2012; Veteli.

⁷⁸Finch; Raggi 2011; Milton, Lumpkin et al.

⁷⁹Raggi 2011; Strejcek 2019; Milton, Lumpkin et al., sections ‘Divest yourself of their fate’ and ‘Let the dice kill them...’. This ‘fudging’ is not an uncommon practice in certain role-playing traditions; see Hammer.

⁸⁰Tuovinen 2012; Tuovinen, *Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D]*; Mizer 2015, chapter 5; Milton, Lumpkin et al., sections ‘...but uphold logic’, ‘Reveal the situation’, and ‘Keep the world alive’.

⁸¹Mizer 2014

⁸²Raggi 2011; Tuovinen 2012; Tuovinen 2013; Tuovinen, *Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D]*.

⁸³Raggi 2011; Tuovinen 2013; Tuovinen, *Writing up Eero’s primordial [D&D]*; Mizer 2015, chapter 5; Milton, Lumpkin et al., sections ‘Let the dice kill them...’ and ‘...but telegraph lethality’.

Randomness and pregenerated content are neutral decision making methods.⁸⁴ Random encounters, in particular, play this role, and add to the strategic question of how far the players should push their characters in a dangerous environment, given that on the other hand they have to get back (in spite of possible random encounters), while on the other hand retreating allows the enemy to organize and recover, and any obstacles on the way have to be navigated again.

Neutral arbitration that does not rely on an exhaustive corpus of rules allows for testing the skill of players, much as skill-based board games and digital games do. In contrast to board games and digital games, the things the player can try are limited only by the fictional situation, not artificial mechanical constraints. Some miniature war games have a similar referee role, and that is the origin of the game master in role-playing games⁸⁵, but most role-playing traditions seem to have moved to very different directions in their understanding of the game master; though in most role-playing games players can have their characters try anything⁸⁶, the resolution and larger development of events is governed by rules mechanism, player narration rights, or the game master's considerations of pace, drama, or planned storylines. Strict neutrality and adherence to in-world logic is far less common.

Of course, there are no guarantees that a given game master can run the game in a neutral way, but the techniques and the mindset can clearly be communicated; I have touched on some of the issues in this section, but neglected other, lower-level techniques, such as rolling dice in the open and declaring the effects of the rolls before doing so. Online accounts and personal experiences of the author suggest that sufficient levels of neutrality can be achieved to make this style of play possible within a role-playing game.

Conclusions

The style of play is related to threefold simulationism, since the game master's decision making is based on considerations of what would really happen in

⁸⁴Tuovinen 2012; Tuovinen 2013; Gillian Smith. "An analog history of procedural content generation." In *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG 2015)*. Edited by Boyang "Albert" Li and Mark Nelson. 2015.

⁸⁵Peterson.

⁸⁶Some Fastaval and freeform games being clear exceptions; the players might have little to no freedom of this type there. Games without a clear game master also often grant plenty of freedom to the players.

the fictional world. Making decisions in terms of dramatic considerations or questions of balance is explicitly advised against, which rules out the threefold dramatism and gamism.

In the creative agenda theory, the style of play fits into the category of step on up, as the players try to advance their characters and accomplish their goals in a hostile setting, and success requires skill and luck from the players.⁸⁷ There are definite victory conditions (earning experience, recovering treasures, whatever personal goals the players set for their characters) and loss conditions (character death). The creative activity is a combination of creative problem solving, strategy, and resource management. There is no guidance that would strongly oppose the other families of creative agendas, but neither is there any positive guidance that would suggest driving the gameplay towards them. Since creative agenda is a matter of players appreciating contributions of each other, no style of play can completely determine it; but this style does provide plenty of challenges in a structured and high-stakes way, so at least opportunities for step on up play are ubiquitous, and the high stakes make them relevant for the players.

Any game refereed as threefold simulationism allows for creative problem solving and strategy, but if the group does not appreciate such solutions or there are no challenges (play does not fall into step on up), then problem solving and strategy might be seen as irrelevant or disruptive.⁸⁸ On the other hand, if the game master is not a neutral arbiter, then fiction-based problem solving has no basis. Step on up play in such conditions might focus, for example, on effective manipulation of a rules system⁸⁹, or on pleasing the game master.

I have given one answer to the ‘hard question’ posed by Edwards⁹⁰ to people playing in a gamist way: Role-playing games are the medium of choice, because they allow for tests of creative problem solving in strategy, tactics and social situations that are hard to test otherwise. For different step on

⁸⁷Finch; Raggi 2011; Milton, Lumpkin et al., sections ‘...but telegraph lethality’ and ‘Play to win, savor loss’.

⁸⁸Edwards, *Gamism: step on up*.

⁸⁹Dormans; Brian Ballsun-Stanton and Samuel Russell. *Constrained optimization in Dungeons and Dragons: A theory of requirements generation for effective character creation*; Björn Sundström. *Design och utvärdering av stridssystem med fokus på meningsfulla val*. Högskolan Skövde, Institutionen för kommunikation och information, 2010. Examensarbete för kandidatexamen. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn%3Anbn%3Ase%3Ahis%3Adiva-4365>.

⁹⁰Edwards, *Gamism: step on up*.

up agendas the answer would obviously be different. We have also touched upon a question of Kim⁹¹ on the relationship between the threefold model and GNS categories.

The process model of role-playing⁹² sheds some light on why using two different classifications is helpful: Creative agenda lives mostly on the level of processes and results, while my interpretation of threefold resides on the level of methods. Likewise, in the framework of the big model⁹³, the threefold model discusses techniques (components of system), which are distinct from creative agendas.

This illustrates how hobbyist role-playing theories that focus on different aspects of tabletop role-play can be combined to describe a style of play in a fair detail. An explanation is provided by the different theories discussing different aspects of the style of play.

In the realm of digital games there are several player typologies.⁹⁴ Examining whether they classify the same or different aspects of players might give new tools for classifying games, players or styles of play in that domain. Even within the field of role-playing there exist other classificatory schemes⁹⁵ which we have not touched upon here, and which might work better for characterizing other styles of play.

⁹¹John H. Kim. *Threefold simulationism explained*. 2004. <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/simulationism.html>.

⁹²Eetu Mäkelä, Sampo Koistinen et al. “The process model of role playing.” In *Dissecting LARP*, Knutepunkt books. 2005, p. 205-236.

⁹³Boss; Torner.

⁹⁴Juho Hamari and Janne Tuunanen. “Player types: A meta-synthesis.” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 1.2 (2014).

⁹⁵Torner.